A note about fruits and vegetables

Eating fruits and vegetables as part of a balanced diet may slightly reduce the risk of some breast cancers.

Carotenoids are natural orange-red food pigments found in fruits and vegetables (like melons, carrots, sweet potatoes and squash). Studies have found that women with higher blood levels of carotenoids had a decreased risk of breast cancer compared to women with lower levels.

Although the effects on breast cancer risk are modest, eating a diet high in fruits and vegetables may lower the risk of heart disease, stroke and other chronic diseases.

Smoking

Findings on a possible link to breast cancer remain mixed, but there is growing evidence smoking may slightly increase the risk of breast cancer. However, smoking increases the risk of many types of cancer (including lung, kidney and pancreatic).

Although smoking may only slightly increase breast cancer risk, stopping or never starting the habit is one of the best things you can do for your health. If you smoke, there are health benefits of quitting at any age.

Emotional health

Taking care of your physical health is key, but taking care of your emotional health and having a sense of happiness and well-being are important too.

• Keep a positive attitude.
• Do things that make you happy and bring balance to your life.
• Be in touch with “your spiritual self” through meditation or prayer. It may help you gain inner peace.

Related fact sheet in this series:
• Breast Cancer & Risk

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Healthy living is more than keeping your body free of disease.
Make Healthy Lifestyle Choices

Did you know you can do things that are good for your health that may lower your risk of getting breast cancer?

1. **Maintain a healthy weight**
   
   Many studies have shown a link between body weight and weight gain and breast cancer risk. However, being overweight or obese affects the risk for pre- and postmenopausal women differently.
   
   • Being overweight or obese BEFORE menopause modestly decreases the risk of breast cancer.
   • Being overweight AFTER menopause increases the risk of breast cancer.
   • Gaining 20 pounds or more after the age of 18 may increase your risk of breast cancer.
   • Losing weight after menopause may lower your risk of breast cancer.

2. **Add exercise to your routine**
   
   Physical activity not only burns energy (calories), but it may also help lower your risk of breast cancer. (This benefit is seen most clearly in women after menopause.) Exercise fights obesity and may lower estrogen levels. It may also boost the immune system so it can help kill or slow the growth of cancer cells.
   
   Before you start an exercise program, see a doctor if you:
   
   • Have been inactive for a long time
   • Are overweight

   Leading a healthy lifestyle will not get rid of your risk of serious health problems like cancer, but it may lower your risk.

   • Have a high risk of heart disease
   • Have a high risk of or have other chronic health problems

   If you are already physically active, keep up the good work!

3. **Limit alcohol intake**
   
   The more alcohol you drink, the higher your risk of breast cancer. Studies have shown that women who had 2-3 alcoholic drinks per day had a 20 percent higher risk of breast cancer compared to women who didn’t drink alcohol. If you drink alcohol, have less than one drink a day.

4. **Limit menopausal hormones**
   
   Menopausal hormone therapy (MHT) is approved for the short-term relief of menopausal symptoms. The main types of MHT are:
   
   • Estrogen plus progestin and
   • Estrogen alone.

   Estrogen plus progestin increases the risk of both developing and dying from breast cancer. Once MHT is stopped, this increased risk returns to that of a woman who has never used hormones in about 5-10 years. Some studies have shown estrogen alone increases the risk of breast cancer. However, one large study found a decreased risk.
   
   Talk to a doctor about the risks and benefits of MHT.

5. **Breastfeed, if you can**
   
   Breastfeeding protects against breast cancer, especially in premenopausal women.